

Spiritan Magazine

Volume 31
Number 2 *May*

Article 13

5-2007

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Recommended Citation

Suntjens, C. (2007). VICS: I Wear Many Coats. *Spiritan Magazine*, 31 (2). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-tc/vol31/iss2/13>

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I wear many coats

Cliff Suintjens

ETHIOPIA

“Ashama!” Ashama? Initially I thought Ashama was a greeting meaning, “Can I help?” But just a few individuals would actually stop for longer than the usual lengthy salutations. The locals of Guagure Bora speak at least three languages and switch from one to another within one sentence — very confusing. After one year I’m beginning to get the gist of what they’re saying.

I wear many coats. I lend a compassionate ear: listening to people’s problems and achievements, sharing thoughts and ideas, giving encouragement, showing that someone cares and that possibly something can be done to stimulate change. By now the community knows that I am not here today and gone tomorrow. I feel I am gaining their trust and support.

Working with Abba Desbele, an enthusiastic parish priest, has taken most of my time, effort and drive. Frequently I am Abba’s confidante providing a second opinion, some encouragement, or a *ferenji* (foreigner) point of view. As an aside, I am often called Abba (Father). At first I was argumentative: “I’m not a priest!” But in this respectful society, youth often acknowledge their male elders thus.

Lately I have been working with Abuna Musie, the bishop of our newly formed diocese, to get his office staff to administer more effectively. This is a challenge considering that their philosophy of time is slightly different from ours. We believe in

doing things *on* time; they believe in doing things *in* time.

Educator and doctor

Another of my responsibilities is being an educator. A teacher (without chalk or brush) comes to mind, but it is more a role of directing and giving ideas and suggestions for funding and operating a 160-student kindergarten and elementary school. Only about 5-6% of adults in this community have ever attended school. The students are mostly barefooted and scantily clad, several with debilitating rickets or skin diseases. Some show evidence of malnutrition and hunger. But all are gleaming with hope and the will to learn. All are happy and excited. I think of myself as the good shepherd caring for the flock’s many needs: health, pen and paper, soap, *chamma* (shoes) or high-fives. The high fives and the hugs provide the most benefit, it seems.

Daily I am “Dr. Cleef” — minus white lab coat or stethoscope. I treat such basics as hygiene and cleanliness and the more complex issues such as eyes, chronic diseases and nutrition.

How do you rationalize helping with financing a ten-year-old needing multiple orthopedic surgeries and follow-ups and rejecting an elderly woman who has been blinded by cataracts for four years? I haven’t yet acquired residency status!

Promoting homegrown food

My main responsibility and area of expertise is being an ardent gardener —

equipped with hoe and overalls. Seventy five per cent of the households believe they don’t have sufficient food for their families’ basic needs. I’m coordinating a three-year agricultural programme based on demonstration, example, involvement and basic education. We have developed a small nursery with fruit trees such as avocado, passion fruit, mango, papaya and coffee and a small thriving garden. We water it by hand during the dry season, but in the rainy season with its daily downpours, watering is the least of our problems.

We are steadily distributing vegetable seeds and a little starter pack of fertilizer and a few small hand tools to those willing to follow advice on preparation, seeding, transplanting and weeding. They repay by giving some produce to help feed the school kids.

I’m continually amazed at the abilities, the inherent knowledge and the strong social bonds among what we might consider illiterate people. Their adaptive use of things we might throw away at home, their use of local grasses and herbs for crafts and medicines, their efficient fires made from limited wood, and the functional pottery they make from soils still elicit wonder in me.

I’ve lost my cool only once (or was it three times?). I’ve wiped my eyes numerous times in sadness and in pleasure. Everyday has a new twist, a new turn, a new problem. Dealing with the situations, the cultural differences, the communication barriers keeps me stimulated and challenged. “Ashama! Ashama!” uplifts me daily. I now know it means, “Keep up the good work!” ■